

“A Research Methods Class that Helps Students Recognize the Worth of Others”

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Higher education has become a flashpoint in our national culture wars. Critics on the right charge that professors politicize the classroom, while detractors on the left call campuses hotbeds of systemic inequality. In my teaching, however, I have found a way to help students navigate these tensions: revamping an upper-division sociology course that teaches a valued research methodology while also helping students genuinely listen to and learn from peers with opposing viewpoints.

Since the 2016 election, colleges and universities have scrambled to find ways to counter political polarization on campus and beyond. They have created new general education courses requiring students to engage in civil discourse. They have asked professors to tag their courses if topics include fundamental principles of democracy. They have created programs related to civic life and citizenship and engagement.

All of these efforts are commendable but, like any curricular efforts, face distinctive challenges. Students can view general education courses as detached from their majors and take them less seriously. Tagged courses can be only marginally related to the desired topic, and do not add up to a coherent whole. New programs often are appealing only to a small population of students already interested in the content, leaving most undergraduates untouched by the intervention. Gearing up new minors and first-year seminars can be time-consuming and costly.

But what if faculty organically embedded capacities for cross-partisan dialogue within coursework they already teach? Doing so would give students the opportunity to learn skills for engaged citizenship through a much wider range of coursework on campus.

I decided to take this approach in a class that, from its title, would appear to have little to do with civic education writ large: Qualitative Research in Educational Settings. In this class, I teach students how to conduct and analyze in-depth interviews, a staple method of inquiry in my discipline, requiring primary data collection. Unlike a survey, which prompts respondents to fill in simple yes or no answers, interviews encourage participants to tell profound stories about when and how they came to hold their beliefs.

Unlike in courses I taught prior to 2016, in which students could collect data on topics of their own choosing, once it became clear that division had been exacerbated by social media and political discourse, I changed direction. I decided to have all of the students in my methods class research one topic: the political beliefs of their peers. The shared objective now is to interview fellow undergraduates about their ideological and partisan beliefs and activism.

A successful interviewer builds rapport by asking good questions, remaining curious, and practicing “epistemological humility”—acknowledging that people with different beliefs have reasons for their ideas, just as we do. The art of interviewing depends on setting aside judgment to understand where people are coming from. Disapproving and taking offense are interview killers.

For the class project, I require my students to find participants who are “maximally different” from themselves, and step 1 is to recruit respondents for the study. If my students lean left—as many sociology majors do—I expect them to interview peers in the political center or on the right. If students are conservative or libertarian, they must find interviewees who support candidates or causes they find too liberal. If students are middle of the road or uninterested in politics, they have free rein to go in any direction.

Because undergraduates, like the rest of us, tend to cluster in networks of people like them, I provide leads on locating participants with opposing beliefs. Early in the term, I invite College Republicans, College Democrats, Young Democratic Socialists of America, Students for Liberty, Turning Point USA, and officers from a variety of cultural identity clubs, such as the LGBTQ+ and Black Student Unions, to introduce themselves to my class. These leaders then serve as contacts to other potential interviewees in their clubs.

Once students have conducted the interviews, we pool the transcripts to create a dataset of approximately 60 interviews. Since each interview lasts 45 to 60 minutes, and approximately 20 students take my methods courses, this results in hundreds of pages of analyzable text. Each student is ultimately responsible for writing their own 15 to 20-page empirical paper, building on the literature to understand contemporary student politics across race, class, gender, region of origin, religion, and ideological orientation. They must draw not only from their own interviews but from those conducted by their classmates as well.

At first, my students are wary of interviewing peers whose beliefs on guns, abortion, and other hot-button issues are dissimilar from their own. They wonder if they can stay in conversation without being offended, or provoked to argue for their ideas.

However, students quickly realize that their interviews do not produce useful data for other class members if they appear judgmental or argumentative. Adopting the researcher’s stance is a lesson in having respectful dialogue across differences and successfully mastering this sociological method.

Not all interviews are seamless: some students have a more difficult time than others keeping an open mind and maintaining a researcher’s perspective throughout a long interview. However, most students try hard and feel a sense of pride when they can engage

with contentious issues intellectually. They comment that these skills will be useful outside the classroom, too.

The jury is out on whether the opportunity to conduct analytical interviews makes a lasting difference in my students' lives. But after this most vitriolic of elections and the transition to a new administration this month, it is well worth their time to practice a mode of inquiry that recognizes the worth of others.